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SUBJECT: KHMER KROM MONK'S POSSIBLE FORCED RETURN TO VIETNAM

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. Over the weekend a Khmer Krom monk in Cambodia was reportedly defrocked and carried off by uniformed authorities. While the monk's whereabouts are not yet confirmed, Ministry of Interior Spokesperson Kheiu Sopheak verified that the monk went to Vietnam. Whether the monk was forced to leave or went of his own free will is currently at issue. Witnesses claim Tim Sakhorn was "forced" into a vehicle by uniformed authorities but the MOI insists he requested to be taken to Vietnam. Tim Sakhorn served as monk of a pagoda near the Vietnam border for twenty years. In addition to doubts about his whereabouts, questions remain about the details of the way Tim Sakhorn was removed from his village, and whether he has claim to Cambodian citizenship. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) The Khmer Kampuchea Krom Human Rights Organization (KKKHRO) reported that a Khmer Krom monk, Tim Sakhorn, was sent from Cambodia to Vietnam over the weekend, possibly forcibly. His removal took place immediately after Tim Sakhorn was defrocked by three monks under the direction of Supreme Patriarch Non Nget. According to the KKKHRO, some of Tim Sakhorn's fellow community members who saw him being driven away from his village report he was forced into a car by Cambodian uniformed authorities. Specifically, villagers told KKKHRO that some of the uniformed authorities were dressed like members of Hun Sen's bodyguard unit. All reports about the incident are sourced to eyewitnesses and are not confirmed otherwise. The Ministry of Interior told Polspec that Tim Sakhorn asked the authorities to take him back to his village in Vietnam after being defrocked. According to KKKHRO, Tim Sakhorn has served as a monk in Kiri Vong for 20 years and his parents reside there.

¶3. (SBU) Tim Sakhorn, age 40, was chief of the Northern Phnom Din pagoda in Kiri Vong district, Takeo province, near the border with Vietnam. KKKHRO told Poloff he was active in distributing information from the Khmer Kampuchea Krom Federation, an international organization advocating the rights of the Khmer Krom living in Vietnam. The monk also was known for providing shelter and food to Khmer Krom monks when they cross the border from Vietnam to Cambodia, including those monks fleeing defrocking and clamp-downs in Vietnam.

¶4. (SBU) One problematic aspect of the situation is whether Tim Sakhorn has a rightful claim to Cambodian citizenship. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Phnom Penh cites a letter dated two years

ago from the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating that the RGC considers Khmer Krom to be "Khmer citizens" and that if UNHCR wants to designate an individual who is Khmer Krom as a refugee, they need to find a third country for resettlement as "Khmer citizens are not able to become refugees in their own country." However, the use in this letter of the term "Khmer" citizen instead of "Cambodian" citizen makes the citizenship claim debatable. Both the KKKHRO and Khmer Kampuchea Krom for Human Rights and Development Association have complained to us that Khmer Krom are often denied Cambodian identity cards by issuing authorities. The Khmer Krom organizations take this as a sign that they are not being treated as full Cambodian citizens.

15. (SBU) The UN Cambodia Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) is supporting a legal complaint and an investigation led by the KKKHRO into the process under which Tim Sakhorn was forcibly removed, though that investigation may be a non-starter given the MOI's statement that the monk willingly went to Vietnam. UNOHCHR told Poloff they are offering support to Khmer Krom monks if they decide to go into hiding due to fears of deportation. Many of the monks have come together at a pagoda in Phnom Penh telling UNOHCHR that they will stay together and not go into hiding as a sign of their solidarity and stance against suppression of their members.

16. (SBU) The KKKHRO says that Khmer Krom monks in Phnom Penh are planning a peaceful march to Udong, 15 miles outside of the city, to protest the activities against their monks. While the plan is for a peaceful assembly, the march could be problematic for participants as the Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs and Supreme Patriarch Non Nget recently signed a ban on monks participating in marches or demonstrations, stating religious figures should not get involved in politics. UNOHCHR confirms that KKKHRO is not revealing detailed plans of their march due to fears it will

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be publicized and blocked before it takes place.

17. (SBU) Comment. Tim Sakhorn's exact whereabouts in Vietnam are still in question. We are trying to corroborate whether the monk was deported or willingly left Cambodia and whether he has rightful claim to Cambodian citizenship. If Tim Sakhorn has a valid claim to citizenship, there would be no legal basis for his deportation. UNHCR Protection Officer Inna Gladkova told Poloff that if the RGC now decides it has the right to deport Khmer Krom to Vietnam, UNHCR may review its policy about the refugee status of Khmer Krom fleeing Vietnam. End comment.  
MUSSOMELI